

## *Fiction Prescriptions: Love*

Ella Berthoud and Isabelle Dupuy

[Intro music]

**Isabelle Dupuy (ID):** Hi, welcome. My name is Isabelle Dupuy, and this is our new podcast, *Fiction Prescriptions*. My co-host is Ella Berthoud.

**Ella Berthoud (EB):** Thanks, Isabelle. We're going to be prescribing fiction to cure life's ailments and looking at different issues every month and giving novels, short stories, and poems which relate to particular themes.

**ID:** And today we're going to talk about love.

**EB:** So we're going to start by thinking about what we were reading as teenagers. I was at boarding school, and I spent a lot of time reading Mills & Boon books, which were secretly brought into the school and were contraband. We actually had to go and steal them out of the staff room where they were kept, so that made it all the more exciting. But actually, what I really loved reading was Jilly Cooper. I was obsessed with Jilly Cooper. And my mum gave me all the Jilly Cooper novels, like *Bella*, *Imogen*, all those early ones that had girls' names. And they had a really big effect on my whole psyche. What were you reading? We'll come back to what it did to me in a minute.

**ID:** Well, yes, because we were saying that it would be interesting to see when we were 15, what we read and how it influenced our concept of love, of romantic love, what we thought was obtainable, desirable, what would make us happy. And I was 15, I was living in Port-au-Prince, and I had a big brace because I had scoliosis, so my movements were limited in all senses of the word. And so, I think this made me look more into fantasy. And so, I was into superheroes; I was into Spider-Man; I was into Superman and Lois Lane. And it's very basic, actually. But I really had this draw for a superhero who could help me rise above my limitations.

**EB:** Funnily enough, I was also obsessed with *Tarzan of the Apes*. And I read all of the Edgar Rice Burroughs. There were, I think, 12 of them. My dad gave them to me. And

looking back on them now, they're quite difficult reads. They're not easy. And of course, it's all this mad fantasy of living in the jungle. And I'm still looking for my Tarzan [both laugh].

ID: You see, it's funny because I grew up in Haiti, where it's in French, and so the French have this way of either translating or doing a parallel universe of the Anglo-Saxon creations. And so, they had a cartoon called Rahan, who was the French Tarzan, who only wore a loincloth as well, but his was actually torn, so you could see—

EB: More revealing.

ID: Exactly. It was [both laugh]. But the book I also remember reading was *Flowers in the Attic*.

EB: Yes, which went round our boarding school like an absolute plague. Everyone was reading that. And I refused to read it because everyone else was reading it. But I know the story, and it's incest.

ID: It's incest, it's dirty, and it was, of course, very titillating.

EB: Very erotic, if you're a 14-year-old frustrated girl.

ID: Yes, exactly. So that was something that marked me. But on the other extreme of it, I used to love [*The*] *Lord of the Rings*.

EB: Oh, yeah.

ID: The Tolkien trilogy, and I was—

EB: That had a strange romantic effect on you.

ID: Yes, and I kept re-reading this romantic story between Aragorn, who was the human warrior, and the elf princess, Arwen. I read this probably 10 times.

EB: Yeah. And do you think that informed your attitude to love ever since?

ID: I think that—

EB: Are you looking for your Aragorn still?

ID: I'm looking for my Aragorn still. I mean, I thought I, as you, we think we find them, and then they last a little bit, and then we have to [EB laughs] be back on the drawing board again. Yes.

EB: Exactly. But Jilly Cooper, I think she had a really good effect on me because, actually, those early books were very thought-provoking. I read them very quickly and saw them as romances with happy endings, but actually looking back on them, they are stories of becoming, and they have quite a feminist message. They're not as, *oh, everyone ends up happily married.*

ID: Mills & Boon.

EB: Exactly. They're quite thought-provoking, and many of the characters in those books end up learning a lot through their experiences and possibly ending up man free, interestingly.

ID: Interestingly indeed.

EB: Yeah, so I'm gonna go back and read them again and see what I learn.

ID: Yeah, I should read them. I've never read them. So now you're making me quite interested. Because for a while, I thought they were just romantic novels.

EB: Easy reads.

ID: Yes, exactly.

EB: Yeah, no. Jilly. We love Jilly.

ID: Oh, thank you. Thank you, Ella. So, from there, we're moving on to a book that we've both re-read for this topic.

EB: And we read first in our 20s.

ID: And read first in the '80s. It's an old book from '84, and it is this one: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera. It is a stunning book in every sense of the word and so current to what we're living today.

EB: Yeah, I recommend it to anyone.

**ID:** It's basically a love story that is flawed from the beginning, between a surgeon and a waitress. And the surgeon cannot give up on womanising, although he is in love with the waitress, and the waitress cannot get over her jealousy over the surgeon's womanising. And this happens around the time when the tanks roll into Prague in '68, and all freedom and even sense of reality in the Czech Republic is warped by the Russians and their totalitarian take on this small country. And it's about how love survives in such an environment, when everything that made you who you are is stripped away. The surgeon becomes a window cleaner.

**EB:** A window cleaner, yeah. And he has a lot of affairs while being a window cleaner because he can meet lots of women through his job. And he's actually very happy doing that job. It's a really amazing book, and I recommend it a lot to people who experience depression because it's a book where you can see yourself reflected and understand other people are going through the same thing. But it's also a very beautiful book about love.

**ID:** And it's a very uplifting book as well. It's beautiful because the end is surprisingly happy. We won't reveal the end, but it is surprisingly satisfying and happy. And this brings us to the idea of purpose and community in love. Because the one character in

*The Unbearable Lightness* that seems to end really alone is the one who actually escapes from the political situation.

EB: Yes.

ID: As opposed to being crushed by it. And the crushing, of course, is countered by the love. So, it's a fantastic book to read. We highly recommend it.

EB: And there's also a really fabulous dog love story in the book.

ID: There is.

EB: And there's quite a big discussion about whether love for a dog is more fulfilling than love for a human [laughs].

ID: Which indeed will strike a chord with many of our listeners. So, the other book from the same time, same time as Milan Kundera, is Tom Robbins' *Jitterbug Perfume*.

EB: Probably my favorite book of all time, and—

ID: You have to survive the first 50 pages.

EB: Yeah, it does feel dated. In a way that Kundera doesn't feel dated.

ID: Because they've become dated. Exactly. But if you can swim through the first 50 pages, you have an enormous treat waiting for you about love again. Because this is in a way the opposite, but it rejoins it. Because love as an island is a weird concept since *[The] Blue Lagoon*. Remember *[The] Blue Lagoon* from the '80s, with Brooke Shields?

EB: Yeah.

ID: Yes. The Western world has been promoting that that is what romantic love is: fusion, right, and isolation. And it doesn't work. It doesn't work in the long term. And in this book, you have a couple that, through all kinds of fantastic and complicated adventures, become immortal. And they stay together, and they love each other.

EB: For 600 years.

ID: Yeah, for 600 years.

**EB:** A big theme in this book is immortality. And Alobar, who's the central character, is a king who, at the very beginning of the book, gets a grey hair. And because he's a king in a tribe in Germany, that means he's got to die because he has to make way for the next king. And he thinks, *sod this. I'm not going to die; I'm going to run away.* So Alobar then spends the next 600 years finding ways to live forever. And one of the things that he discovers is that you should have a bath every day, you should have an orgasm every day, and you should breathe in a circular way. And that's the secret, everyone, to eternal life, by the way. And because he discovers this—

**ID:** And love. And love.

**EB:** Exactly.

**ID:** And he is happy with that. The woman he's with is a perfume—is a perfumer. She's a perfumer. She's also another one who escapes from death. She's from India. She's supposed to be put on a settee, and she runs away from it. And she also, with him, learns how to stay alive for 600 years. But he is happy with their relationship. He doesn't need more. He is complete. She is the one who says after 600 years, 'Maybe we need more purpose in our life than running around like gypsies, around continents

for 600 years.' And it's a beautiful story that makes you think about the relation between connection, corporal connection, right, the physicality of life—

EB: It's a very physical and passionate book, isn't it?

ID: Exactly, against a more Cartesian—of course the—

EB: You were saying it was quite a dirty book.

ID: It is also a dirty book, yes.

EB: Which is true.

ID: Yeah, yeah. A lot of smells. A lot of smells [both laugh]. Fantastic read. And the bad guy is an intellectual who's trying to become immortal but only through science and not through the heart.

EB: Yeah, that's true.

ID: Yeah. And so, it's a good—it rejoins Milan Kundera and this idea of love as connection.

EB: It's a very exuberant book.

ID: Yes.

EB: Which, one might say, is the opposite of this one: *Big Kiss, Bye-Bye* by Claire-Louise Bennett. So, this is very beautifully written. It's a book that you can pick up and read any page and be stunned by the prose. It's also very funny. It's one that I've been looking at and chortling over. But it's a love story of a really depressing nature because it's, as you were saying, it's love in isolation. It's a very insular kind of love of a woman for an older man.

ID: And it ends up being a bit nihilistic in its scope, in its philosophy, because exactly, there's nothing else going on. This woman is alone, she's moved, and she's thinking back to her relationships. And there's something very bare about this, and there's something that is not embracing of life.

EB: It's depressing, frankly.

ID: So, the philosophy behind this we found a bit troubling.

EB: But it does have a beautiful kiss.

ID: Yes.

EB: A very beautiful kiss.

ID: Yes.

EB: So, it's a great read.

ID: Memory of a kiss.

EB: But it's a sad one, and we said we didn't want unhappy endings. This would be a good cure for romantic illusions [laughs]. If you feel like you're trapped in the belief that everything's going to work out happily, then read this book. I think it's a good book for actually standing on your own two feet and making you feel like you should get on with your life and not rely on a man—

ID: Yes.

EB: Or woman to do that.

ID: I think it's a good book as a cautionary tale. I think it's a cautionary tale because I think that this book promotes individualism too much. I think that to stand on your own two feet, we can talk about this book: *Skin & Bones* by Renée Watson. And this book is also about a woman who's also trying to figure out her power, just like *Big Kiss, Bye-Bye*. But she discovers her power through other people, through caring for other people. She is very overweight, she's Black, and she finds love in an environment that is really hostile to her. There's a scene in this book where she goes into an aeroplane, and the way she is treated is quite galling, actually. People don't want her to sit next to them. They don't want to lift the arm thing because she needs that space. And yet, her way of connecting to herself again, after being depressed and humiliated like this, is to reach out, is to care for others, is to contribute. And so, you understand in *Skin & Bones*, the man – she does find love – and the man loves her for who she is because you love her too.

EB: It's a story of redemption, isn't it?

ID: Yes, it is.

EB: And happy ending.

ID: Yes, and very much happy ending. Very much happy ending.

EB: Yeah. Which brings me to a play I want to mention by Niall Williams called *O Now*, which has been aired on the BBC recently. And it's one of the most moving, wonderful love stories I've heard in years. And it's about two old men. At the very beginning of the book, one of them dies, and so it's partly a lot about mortality. And they've been great friends in a very male, understated way for years. And they made a pact with each other that whoever got to heaven first would send a message back. So the guy is waiting for this message back. But what makes it really beautiful is it also is a story about community and about the wider connections that the two old men had with other people in the community, and it becomes another kind of love story.

ID: Yes.

EB: Yes. And it's called *O Now* because it's about living in the present.

ID: And that brings us to a short story that we'd like to talk about, which is also about the broadening of love to encompass the world around us today. And it's called *A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* by Carson McCullers. Old story from the 1950s. And it starts with a boy who's in a cafe on a road in America, and this man comes in.

[ID reads from *A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud*]

The boy went toward him. He was an undersized boy of about twelve, with one shoulder drawn higher than the other because of the weight of the paper sack. His face was shallow, freckled, and his eyes were round child eyes.

"Yeah Mister?"

The man laid one hand on the paper boy's shoulders, then grasped the boy's chin and turned his face slowly from one side to the other. The boy shrank back uneasily.

"Say! What's the big idea?"

The boy's voice was shrill; inside the café it was suddenly very quiet.

The man said slowly: "I love you"

ID: So, this sounds quite creepy, doesn't it, to today's audience?

EB: Yeah, it's a strange beginning of the story.

ID: Stranger man with a boy, paper boy, who stopped in this cafe to drink something and to drop a paper. And yet, this story develops into a universal love story. Because that man, who says to the boy, 'I love you', is a man who's lost the love of his life. The only woman he's ever loved has left him. And out of the ashes of his despair, he's learned to love, to love a tree, a rock, a cloud, and the world around him. And so, this is where we're going, isn't it, Ella? We're going towards this theme of going from a romantic love to a broader love, and does that bring us back to the romantic love?

EB: Well, in a way it does. I feel it's a good segue into the stories and books of Patrick Gale, who is an author that I've always loved and recommended hugely to all my bibliotherapy clients because he creates characters that you completely sink into and believe in, and they become your friends. This book, *Love Lane*, is his latest one, and it's a sequel to *A Place Called Winter*, which was a love story between two men. In brief, it's about a gay man who is discovered to be gay and has to leave England and go and live in the plains of Saskatchewan, a place called Winter, where he runs a farm and falls in love with a man. This is when he needs to come back to England years later, and he's an old man, and he has also lost the love of his life. And it's about the new connections

he makes. And it's a really beautiful, lovely story. And I just feel with Patrick Gale, you always sink into these wonderful, real lives, and you completely feel like you are there. And it's very redemptive and human.

ID: And is validating.

EB: And very much about community and the importance of community.

ID: So, what we're saying here, I think, is that we feel perhaps that from going from the island of love to go to a life—that love is a way for us to participate in life.

EB: Yeah, I think that's right. Yeah, so going from the insular to the—

ID: To the wider community, to the wider planet.

EB: Exactly.

ID: And it's funny how we're always drawn still though to this island idea, aren't we?

EB: Yeah.

ID: This individualistic idea where we are supposed to be on our own, and maybe the one loved person has to fulfill all our needs because we're on an island alone with this other person.

EB: Exactly.

ID: And is that an unrealistic goal at the end of the day?

EB: Yeah. So, we have a poem which explores this idea, *As I Walked Out One Evening* by W. H. Auden. Shall I start reading it?

ID: That would be lovely.

EB: Okay.

[EB reads from *As I Walked Out One Evening*]

'As I walked out one evening,

Walking down Bristol Street,

The crowds upon the pavement  
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river  
I heard a lover sing  
Under an arch of the railway:  
'Love has no ending.

'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you  
Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street,

'I'll love you till the ocean  
Is folded and hung up to dry  
And the seven stars go squawking  
Like geese about the sky.

'The years shall run like rabbits,  
For in my arms I hold

The Flower of the Ages,  
And the first love of the world.'

But all the clocks in the city  
Began to whirr and chime:  
'O let not Time deceive you,  
You cannot conquer Time.'

ID: Yeah, this is exactly. And because the time will eat away at the body.

EB: Yeah.

ID: And then what is left?

EB: Yeah, I feel for me, it's the same message as *O Now*, that sense of plunging your wrists into the cold water.

ID: Exactly.

EB: And feeling intensely this moment.

ID: Because then it doesn't matter so much, the aging, like in the *Jitterbug Perfume*. The aging and the wrinkling of the skin, it doesn't matter because you've invested in other things. You've invested in actually being close to people's souls.

EB: That also makes me think of the final line in *Jitterbug Perfume*, which is 'Erleichda', which is a phrase that comes up throughout the book. It's a German phrase used in the book by Einstein, who takes part in some of the events, and it means 'Lighten up'. And that is the central phrase, in a way, of *Jitterbug Perfume*. Lighten up. Take things lightly.

ID: Because if everything doesn't hang in one vessel, on one thing, it's a lot easier to lighten up, isn't it?

EB: That's true. And it also brings us back to *Archy and Mehitabel*, 'toujours gai'.

ID: Yes.

EB: Which means 'Always be cheerful'. And I think they're kind of the same message, 'Erleichda' and 'toujours gai'.

ID: Yes.

EB: Be light, go light on your feet.

ID: Go light on your feet. There's actually a saying, a French saying. that being gay is a politeness.

EB: Oh, that's nice. I like that.

ID: Yeah. But did we answer the question?

EB: No, I've just remembered that.

ID: Yes, indeed.

EB: The question was?

ID: Is love overrated?

EB: And a lot of our books have really different answers to that. I think [*Big Kiss, Bye-Bye*] would say perhaps that it is overrated.

ID: But then what's left?

EB: Yeah, exactly.

ID: When we were young, we expected romantic love to really transport us, right, to change who we were, to transform us into superheroes, into flying creatures, into aliens from outer space, with huge capacities for emotion and for orgasms and for everything. And then life happens, and life goes on. And what do you think, Ella?

EB: And we realize that we have to settle for less. But I don't know, I'm still looking for Alobar/Tarzan [both laugh].

ID: /Superman.

EB: The novels have a lot to answer for, it's true.

**ID:** Yes, they do. But then I think that this looking for this sublime, maybe we start to find in ourselves. We start to find our own superpowers, right?

**EB:** That's true.

**ID:** And our own superhero capacities for being really happy sometimes and really sad some other times. And maybe that what these novels were looking for was hyperbole or hyperbolic, but at the end, someone who can share those feelings with you.

**EB:** And also, it brings me back to Mehitabel again, 'toujour gai'. That's something that is coming from herself. She's in control of her own destiny. She's a crazy alley cat, but there's life in the old dame yet. So, I think she looks inside herself and finds her superpowers.

**ID:** Yeah, I think there is that moment after your teenage years when your life actually has been quite small, you haven't done very much yet, but your emotions are very big because they're all in the future. And now you've lived, and you've done a lot, and you've learned to control your emotions a bit more, and—we hope—and you realise that indeed lightness of being, lightness of being is where it's at. Yeah, and that's how

that book ends. That's how that's how *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* ends, without revealing the end. It is about, yeah, lightness even in the face of death

EB: Yeah, fantastic. Brings us back to 'Erleichda'.

ID: Yeah. So, I think we go a full—maybe we do—love is overrated if we look at it from a teenage perspective, looking at overblown romance novels that oversell a moment, a moment in time.

EB: Yeah, a kiss.

ID: But love is not overrated as a way of life and as a way of lightness, as a way of being light.

EB: Yeah, and there's a moment in many of the books that we've discussed and in the play, *O Now*, where love seems to overtake the whole world in a really wonderful, profound way. So, love is definitely not overrated, but maybe novels do have quite a lot to answer for [laughs].

ID: Yes. Ella, thank you so much. This has been such a fantastic discussion.

EB: Thank you. I feel enlightened.

ID: Me too. I feel in love [both laugh]. We'll see you next time on *Fiction Prescriptions*.

Our next topic will be?

[Outro music]

EB: The state of the world. It's a big one.

ID: It's a big one. We'll find love in there, too.

EB: We will [both laugh]. Do send in questions if you have any. We'd love to know your particular thoughts, and we'll be ready and waiting with *Fiction Prescriptions*.

ID: Yes, so please send us your questions. We can't wait to see them.

EB: Thank you.

ID: Thank you.

A recording of this podcast can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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